

On site at Silchester with Joanna Langley

Ever wanted to take part in an archaeological dig? Joanna Langley puts her boots on and gives us her perspective on excavating Romano-Britain.

Most of us associate camping in a muddy field near Reading with the annual music festival, but every summer volunteers aged 16 and over pitch their tents at nearby Silchester to excavate Roman and Iron Age remains. This summer, between my Lower and Upper Sixth, I was one of these volunteers, and soon discovered that watching Time Team has nothing on getting one's hands dirty. The Silchester archaeological dig is run by the University of Reading and, though fifteen years old already, will continue for another couple of years. It is called 'The Town Life Project' as the focus of the dig is to find out more about daily life in a Romano-British town.

The history of the site

Silchester is the modern name for the Roman town of Calleva Atrebatum. There is no contemporary British town of that name, just a village nearby – which makes Calleva Atrebatum one of only six Romano-British towns without a later settlement built on it. This makes it an archaeologist's dream since the entire site is easily accessible.

Calleva Atrebatum covers some forty hectares of the Hampshire countryside and was already attracting archaeological attention in the Victorian period when a local vicar, the Reverend James Joyce, was intrigued by the substantial Roman walls jutting out above the fields. His most significant discovery was a bronze eagle, found in the remains of the Roman basilica, and now housed in Reading Museum – the eagle which inspired Rosemary Sutcliff's book *The Eagle of the Ninth* which in turn led to the 2011 film *The Eagle*. In these fictional versions, the bronze was assumed to have topped a military standard, a theory discredited by modern-day archaeologists. They prefer to see it as part of a first-century A.D. statue (maybe of Jupiter or a Roman emperor) which was incorporated into the foundations of the forum basilica a century later.

The Reverend Joyce's discoveries attracted the attention of the Society of Antiquaries who excavated the site from

1890 to 1909. They enlisted the help of local agricultural labourers who proceeded to dig systematic trenches from one side of the Roman walls to the other. They regularly came across ancient remains and drew up a map of the Roman town arranged on a classic grid pattern with the basilica in the centre, guest house near the south gate, baths, temples, and a large amphitheatre just outside the town. Although their work was accurate, by modern archaeological standards they were 'treasure hunters', ploughing furrows in search of solid structures and valuable artefacts. No amount of care could lead them back to the many wooden structures which once fought for space between the stone and brick work – with the result that their map makes the city appear all too spacious, more akin to an early twentieth-century 'garden city' than a crowded Roman 'transport hub'. Calleva Atrebatum lay on a key trade route between London and the West and South West. Roads radiated out from Silchester providing access to the Roman settlements at Winchester, Southampton, Exeter, Dorchester, Old Sarum, and Gloucester.

In search of the real Calleva Atrebatum

Reading University's 'Town Life Project' seeks to correct this picture. Rather like Mary Beard's *Meet the Romans* TV programme, it aims to tell the untold story of how ordinary residents lived, what professions they had, what they ate... It focuses on one particular square of the grid, Insula IX, because of its proximity to the forum basilica and the intersection of two Roman roads. There is also evidence of a diagonal track across the plot dating from the earlier Iron Age settlement when alignments were based on midsummer sunrises and sunsets.

Project-leader Professor Michael Fulford had worked on excavations of the basilica and amphitheatre in the 1970s and was intrigued by evidence of Iron Age artefacts pre-dating the Roman settlement. The Roman name Calleva

Atrebatum literally means 'wooded area of the Atrebates tribe' and an Iron Age coin found on Insula IX depicts Verica, son of Commius, the first king of the Atrebates. Verica ruled Calleva in the early half of the first century A.D. and later fled to the court of emperor Claudius providing one of the pretexts for the Roman invasion of Britain in A.D. 43. The co-existence of Iron Age and early Roman structures within Insula IX would suggest that the Celtic tribe and Roman newcomers had lived side-by-side initially, and that the town was governed with local tribal co-operation.

The ultimate objective of the Insula IX excavation is to get back to 'natural geology' and with fifteen years of the project already undertaken, we had reached the early Roman and Iron Age period. My own task for the week was to demolish the remains of an early stone wall. It felt strange at first to destroy something built almost two thousand years ago, but 'destruction' need not mean annihilation. All finds are carefully plotted and catalogued and it is only by delving deeper and deeper that the archaeologists can see what each and every overlapping layer of the site has to tell us. My wall, built in the early Roman period but arranged diagonally on the Iron Age alignment, may well have been an enclosure wall protecting Iron Age structures, or one side of an important building to the south of Insula IX.

Clay floors found across the site point to the existence of eight or nine timber buildings. Any evidence of a hole or ditch, often merely suggested by a discoloration of the soil where timber had rotted or a dip was filled in with different material, was investigated and meticulously recorded. Many of these holes contained dense black deposits which, upon analysis, proved to be compacted charcoal indicating the presence of hearths.

Treasure in trash

After fifteen years of digging and scraping, the site was pitted and pockmarked and resembled a lunar landscape. Insula IX seems to have contained more than its fair share of latrines, rubbish pits, and wells but, far from disappointing Professor Fulford (seen above on site), these provided valuable information

about how people lived and what they ate. One of last year's trophies was an olive stone. It might not sound much compared to a bronze eagle but from little acorns... It shows that olives were being imported into Britain earlier than was previously thought. Wells too could provide crucial information about ancient trade and alcohol consumption: analysis of the fragments of wooden barrels which were used to shore up their sides indicate that vast quantities of wine were imported into Calleva Atrebatum. Site participants were given the opportunity to analyse soil samples in a flotation tank where dead plant remains and charcoal rise to the top, providing yet more information about diet.

Larger finds such as ceramic building materials were cleaned and sorted. A toiletry set containing tweezers, nail-cleaner, and ear-scoop on a ring was found near my wall and we soon became familiar with the different types of pottery ranging from fragments of coarse local Silchester ware to smooth, deluxe Samian ware. The presence of Samian ware is again evidence of trade – it is a red pottery imported from Gaul.

Death and renewal

At some point in the fifth or sixth century, Calleva Atrebatum was abandoned. Why? We do not know. It had clearly been a prosperous town with all the facilities a Roman town could have wished for and one would have expected the indigenous population to have remained after the fall of the Roman Empire to benefit from its sophisticated infrastructure. Perhaps the answer lies in its wells which were filled, apparently deliberately (in one case with a column fragment that can be dated to the fifth century because of the type of 'Ogham' writing from Ireland on it). Were they contaminated, making the town uninhabitable? Or perhaps the town was simply eclipsed by the growth of nearby Winchester as the capital of Anglo-Saxon Wessex.

That said, all is far from lost. The 'Town Life Project' has already yielded wonderful results and with two years left to run, the soil of Insula IX may still have secrets to reveal. If you can bring yourself to wield a trowel or a mattock in a Hampshire field for a week or two in the summer holidays, you too could be part of the team uncovering the secrets of the lost Roman city of Calleva Atrebatum.